West Cheshire College: Creating a VLE using WordPress

Summary

West Cheshire College created a VLE using WordPress in order to save money and improve the staff and students’ usage of it.

About West Cheshire College

West Cheshire College is a leading specialist further education college with two main campuses located in Chester and Ellesmere Port. It combines the very highest standards of teaching and work-based skills development with a flexible and responsive approach, ensuring that all students can access opportunity and achieve their full potential.

The challenge

Sean Herbert, Section Leader of Learning Technologies, was given the task to find a new VLE for the college. Initially the reason behind this was financial. They had been using an externally hosted solution as their VLE. When the subscription was up for renewal they decided it was too expensive to continue and wanted more control so started to look for something new. Sean then looked at different VLEs including Moodle, Blackboard and Sharepoint and decided that he wanted to build something that he could tailor to the college's needs.

Two of the college’s subject areas, games development and music, were already using WordPress and had created their own VLE. He took their ideas and looked at what he could do with it. He then consulted everyone in the college and told them what it was that he wanted to do and found out what their needs were. This was much better than just getting something in and trying to make it fit. It was agreed that WordPress was something that everyone could work with and it would do what they wanted. Sean started to develop it between March and July 2013 when it was then rolled out during staff development week.

The activity

Sean took a month to build and implement the WordPress site. He and a team of four other tutors who had already been using it then rolled out the training. None of the team had to spend time and money going on external training courses as it was something they were already familiar with and could easily train other members of staff on the system themselves.
Sean explains: “People were afraid to use WordPress because they thought it would be difficult but I have been quite surprised with just how easy it has been.”

Every member of staff attended a two hour training session with Sean. That is all that was required for them to get started with the VLE. Sean also created an online guide so after staff had been trained they could use it to remind themselves on any points they had forgotten. Initially the training was kept to the basics. Sean wanted to ensure everyone was at a level where they could get started. Then any time there was something new, like putting in Facebook or Twitter, extra training sessions could be provided.

Sean asked Anthony Beal, eLearning Adviser for Jisc RSC Northwest to be involved with bringing in new technologies to the VLE. He already knew about posting videos and hosting documents and Prezis, but he wanted advice on what else was out there. Anthony created avatars and suggested other interactive tools that staff could use within their teaching. He developed online introductions to the different resources and created online welcome packs for teacher training courses. The avatar explained what the courses and resources were and introduced what the students were going to learn. Staff have replicated these in their own courses. The students love it. It is more interesting to see an animation of an introduction rather than just reading a document. Sean says: “It was really helpful to have Anthony on board.”

As WordPress supports HTML5, any online assessments, quizzes, Twitter and Facebook can be embedded into it. There is no work figuring out how to do it. So many people already develop tools for WordPress that are free. If Sean needs a quiz he just uses one of the free quiz plugins that are already available. He explains: “There are so many people out there who are willing to help us for free on the forums. We don’t have to employ a person to develop it.”

The outcomes

When choosing the system, staff were consulted. They were shown what WordPress could do and asked what they needed from it. They were shown how to use it and given enough notice to set it up. Because of this they really embraced it.

Sean tells us: “They have all been really positive about it. No one has asked to go back to the old system or use a different one. We were conscious that if we didn’t do it right and didn’t train staff from the beginning then they could be quite negative about it.”

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Both staff and students are now using WordPress much more than the last VLE. They have more than 2000 full time students with nearly 30,000 accesses per month. Students use it from home now as well. One third of people who access WordPress do so from home. They use it on their phones and tablets which was not possible with the old system.

The biggest challenge was getting everyone to be consistent with it. Sean has introduced quality control now. All staff are using it but the next challenge is to get everyone to the same level and to share good practice. In order to do this Sean has created an exemplar site with the best bits from every area. When people want to know how to do something they can just look at this site.

Since the launch in September 2013 it has never broken, never gone down and has always been accessible. People don’t notice when they upgrade it because it continues to operate smoothly and there has never had a problem.

Sean explains: “I was quite shocked at how successful it was and how easy it has been. It was quite daunting at the start to be given two months to develop and implement a new VLE.”

The impact

WordPress has saved a significant amount of money. It has cost a lot less than the annual subscription they used to pay. Many staff and students already use WordPress so they already have that skill in how to use it. The staff and students all prefer it.

Emma Sharkey, Hairdressing student: “I use the VLE a lot. I can download the PowerPoints to my phone, which means I can revise, and look ahead at what’s coming up. I use it to go back over things, also If you have missed a session you can get all of the work.”

Hairdressing videos

The new VLE has helped students work from home. It supports videos and documents extremely well. Once embedded students can watch the videos and revise from home. Sean
Matthew Flynn, Assistant Manager of Construction and Building Services: “The introduction of our new VLE had an instant, positive, impact on teaching and learning both inside and outside of the classroom. We have the ability to upload all learning aims, outcomes, objectives, resources and control the contents similar to that of creating your very own website. The new VLE allows me to constantly keep students informed and updated on the latest construction developments which they can access instantly from college and home.”

Next Sean wants to integrate it with Office 365, use it to submit assignments and integrate it even further with social media. He also plans to introduce student forums, give each student a public site to create an online CV and use the system as their ePortfolio as well.

**The lessons learned**

Sean suggests: “Make sure that all staff are on board before you start because otherwise it won’t work. We consulted everyone and made sure WordPress could do everything they required before deciding to go with it.

“Continuous training is important as well because the system is developing so fast, make sure that you always have training sessions for people to attend with videos of how to do everything to make it really easy. The easier it is the more everyone will use it.”

If you want to find out more please contact Sean Herbert on 01244 656593 or s.herbert@west-cheshire.ac.uk.

**Useful links**

- [Jisc RSC Northwest](#)
- [West Cheshire College](#)
- [WordPress](#)

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